A Single Decision (Take Two)

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Aboard Invisible Hand, on that fateful day above Coruscant, Grievous makes a choice that causes a few little changes for the Separatists and Republic alike. [rewrite of a much older story]
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Chapter 35

Nothing out there, yet. Asajj closed the window's curtain. They were so far from any urban area that the closest town was just a glow on the horizon. Riberre's mountain top estate had a commanding view of all the surrounding hills and valleys, they'd see anyone coming from kilometers away. She looked over to the room's other occupants. Miha Voyan sat on a chair, free and unbound, but knowing better than to try anything. Ahsoka Tano was reading his datapad. Naka was hiding in a corner, being pointedly ignored by the Human male. Two of Riberre's men stood guard at the door, waiting for their boss to arrive.

"I don't know what you're looking for," said Tano, not looking up from the datapad.

"Making sure I wasn't followed," Asajj said. "I don't know what *you're* reading."

"Me either, honestly. Why do you have so many scientific articles on black dwarf stars, Separatist?" asked Tano.

"They shouldn't exist," said Voyan. "But they're out there."

"So you read about space anomalies, but you also read about... Zygerrian culinary history?" Tano's face scrunched up. "I'm surprised it's just not butchering slaves too tired to work."

"The whole Zygerrian race doesn't have the occupation of slaver, you know," said the man.

"Get a load of some of these titles, Ventress," Tano went on. "*The Dynamic Between the Skakoan Religion and Techno Union Lifeform Resources Policy.* Wow, that sounds *really* interesting. More Skakoan stuff... More Zygerrian stuff. Oh, here's something different. *Stalimur: An Echo of Pre-Hyperdrive Human Civilization.*"

"Stalimur? Isn't that out in the Tion Cluster?" Asajj asked.

"I've never heard of it," Tano said. "Here's a whole lot of archaeology stuff from the Tion Cluster, though. And a lot about the Ash Worlds. We're back to weird space things, I guess. And then... oh no, these articles get into physics and math, yuck!"

"Figures you'd say that," the Separatist muttered. "Tell me, did you learn trigonometry, at the Temple?"

"Trigo-what?" Asajj asked. She'd never heard that word in her life before.

"Trigonometry, it's about... triangles and stuff. Like when you want to find the angle between two sides of a triangle," Tano said to her. Riberre's men, two Zeltrons who could have been chiseled from stone, exchanged a confounded look. "We were supposed to learn intermediate mathematics, but then the war happened, and we never got around to it."

"That sounds like something I will never, *ever* need to use out here in the real world," Asajj said.

"Maybe not in the world of abduction and theft," said Voyan. "Are you really sitting here and letting this happen, Tano? I thought you Jedi liked to pretend you were better than this."

"Watch it, Separatist," Tano said.

"See? You even talk like Captain Komara. She'd never go along with this."

"Don't compare me to that traitor." Tano sneered at the man. "Yeah, we're both out of the Order. I was framed, and even when the Council knew I wasn't guilty, they still expelled me because the Senate wanted it. But I still stayed true to my oath to the Republic! It's the Jedi Council who failed me, not the Republic. She *actually* betrayed the Republic, and ran off to join you lot! And then turned dark side on top of it all!"

Voyan turned to Asajj. "She really can't see that the Jedi are just the Republic's tools?"

"No," said Asajj. "She really can't."

Tano was fuming, and she made to speak, but the door opened, and the Nautolan of the hour appeared. "Mister Voyan!" Riberre said, his arms wide. "Welcome to my estate! Or, one of them, at least. I trust you had a pleasant journey?" He placed a chair down, its back facing Voyan, and straddled the seat, leaning forward on the backrest.

"I didn't wake up with any bruises, so I assume so, Mister Riberre."

That got a big laugh from the Nautolan, but Asajj could see how easily he was faking his amiability. Naka wrung her hands in her corner, fear oozing out of her spirit. "I'm sorry for the arrangements I made to get you here. But I've got a target painted on my back, and I needed to talk sooner than later. Besides, Naka tells me you weren't likely to accept a more optional invitation."

"She was right," said Voyan. There was fear in him, too, but Asajj sensed that same determination she'd sensed the prior night. A determination built on hatred, though of who, Asajj couldn't tell. It seemed to be aimed at every person in the room *except* the two Force sensitives. Asajj wasn't used to anyone feeling ambivalent toward her.

"A pity," Riberre said. "I'd like to know about the assassin. I'm guessing they're from Jabiim, that's what my friends up high have told me. Who is it? What is their methodology? When will they strike? And where?"

"Even if I knew, I wouldn't tell you," said Voyan. Naka looked like her stomach had just dropped out through the floor.

"I'm not a man who likes being refused, Mister Voyan," Riberre said, his smile dropping away.

"It's nothing personal, Mister Riberre," Voyan said, arms crossed over his chest. "But men like you have destroyed my homeworld. I won't deny the Jabiimis their justice in taking you down."

"Naka, where did you say he's from?" asked Riberre.

"Lirra," said Naka.

"Ah, that explains it." The Nautolan nodded slowly. "If you had the guts to get out of there, I don't think I'm going to get anything out of you by being nice."

"You're not," Voyan said. "I have no doubt you'll get me to crack, but... it's the principle of the matter, Mister Riberre."

"Of course, I can understand that," said Riberre, standing up. "Let me guess, you're trying to buy the assassin time, so that they can kill me, and perhaps spare others in the galaxy the life you had back home?"

"Something like that," Voyan said, the dejected resignation on his face hiding the building worry inside. The Nautolan eyed him up and down, and for a moment, Asajj could feel Voyan was having second thoughts. But only for a moment, his determination to be a bother surged back.

"Ventress tells me you're traveling with a lady. I think I'll leave your face alone for this, I wouldn't want to upset her. Assuming you walk out of here, that is." Riberre gave him a cold smirk.

"Go to hell, Nautolan."

"Ah, now you're speaking my language, Human." Riberre motioned to Asajj, Tano, and Naka. "Ladies, please leave the room. I don't like making messes in front of women."

"You heard the boss," Asajj said, taking Tano by the shoulders. "You too, Naka."

"But-" Naka started to stay, but Asajj yanked her arm.

The three of them waited elsewhere in the manor house. Vaguely, Asajj was aware that a certain Human male was getting the living daylights beaten out of him. Not fatally, probably, but painfully. *Glad I'm not him,* she thought. *A lightweight like that is going to crack like an egg when he's hit.*

Tano and Naka were both staring at the floor. The Togruta was first to break.

"Are we just letting this happen?" she asked.

"Yes," said Asajj.

"You never go against Marko," Naka murmured, looking sick. "Never."

"Torture is a war crime-"

"And what war is Marko Riberre fighting in?" Asajj asked. "Don't be obtuse, Tano. That Separatist had a choice to talk or be made to talk. He knew what he was getting into."

"Shut up, Ventress," Tano snapped. "I've had enough of you right now!" With that, she stormed off to another room.

"Do you really think he'd be any better off with your Loyalist friends?" Asajj called after her. "I really can't stand idealists, sometimes," she told Naka. But Naka didn't answer, she just stood at a window and stared into the dark night beyond.

Some time later, Riberre found them. He had thrown his colorful Ibisa-style jacket over his shoulder and was wiping his hands with a towel. "There you two are," he said, with a grin. "He held out longer than I thought."

"Is he alive?" asked Naka.

"Yes. He won't be walking out of here today, though." Naka squirmed, but said nothing. "So, Ventress," the Nautolan went on, "do you know anyone by the name of Zule Xiss?"

Asajj took a few moments to search her memories, before shaking her head. "Never heard of her," she said.

Being out of command was not something Obi-wan was familiar with. Three and a half years of war had given him one constant: that he was a general, and a general's work was never done. And for the first time in a long time, Obi-wan was no longer a general, at least for now. Commander Cody was sympathetic to his plight, and out of respect and admiration for his leadership, allowed him to stay on *Vigiliance*'s bridge and operations deck, in a purely advisory role.

"I've just gotten off a call with Riberre," an officer said to Cody, "he's given us his location. We can land troops whenever you're ready, Commander."

"Make it so," said Cody. "We have no idea what we're up against, but since there's no one else for kilometers around that house, we can bring some heavier weapons without any risk of collateral damage to the locals."

Glad to see he's been learning from me, Obi-wan thought, as he leaned against a bulkhead, out of the way.

"Sir," another officer said, "the Separatist destroyer just launched a shuttle. *Maxillipede*-class. One life-sign aboard."

"That's not exactly a planetary invasion force," Cody muttered. "Track their trajectory."

"Their re-entry path is going to miss Ibisa's spaceport completely," the officer said. "It'll take them straight to an industrial area outside the city."

"Not many people could get hurt out there," said Cody. "Whatever the Seps are up to, they don't want to catch the Zeltrons in the cross-fire any more than we do. Keep an eye on them."

"Yes, sir."

An hour of quiet passed. A squad of clone troopers departed for the surface in two gunships. The Zeltron government lodged a formal protest, which Cody paid lip-service to. Then, *Vigilance* received two hails, from two separate sources. One was for the commanding officer on the ship, the other was for Obi-wan personally. Both came from the planet.

"We're popular this morning General," Cody said.

"Yes we are," agreed Obi-wan. They went to separate holoprojectors and took their calls.

Ahsoka Tano appeared from the projector, looking deeply troubled. "Master Obi-wan," she said. "I know I'm a private citizen and should keep my nose out of Jedi affairs, but you need to know this."

"Know what?"

"Zule Xiss is alive."

The name tugged at his memory, and Obi-wan had to think. "Zule Xiss... she was Master Glaive's padawan... and she was killed in action on Jabiim, three years ago." He stroked his beard, and furrowed his brow. "I wonder what it was? Cybernetics? Sith sorcery?"

"You seem really at ease considering a Jedi just came back to life," Ahsoka said, giving him a skeptical look.

"If Maul can come back from the dead, anyone can," Obi-wan said. "Sudden resurrections don't bother me much anymore."

"Fair enough. So, Riberre got this out of that Separatist- the one working for Komara, that is- did you know Komara's down here?"

"I met Komara and Voyan yesterday morning," Obi-wan said.

"Yeah, Voyan. Riberre had Ventress abduct him a few hours ago. He says that Zule Xiss is the Jabiimi assassin sent to kill Riberre. He says they brought her back to life and brainwashed her." Ahsoka grimaced. "That's a pretty horrible fate, if you ask me."

"Ahsoka, you know that Ventress is the one who killed Xiss's master, on the moon of Naboo, right? And she's the one who cut off Xiss's arm?" Obi-wan asked her. The girl's eyes widened.

"Oh. This is going to get really messy, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is," said Obi-wan. He looked over his shoulder. Cody was talking with Riberre, no doubt about this same subject. "It already is getting messy. Chancellor Tarkin relieved me of duty, we're landing troops on Zeltros against their government's wishes, and now the Separatist's are... landing something on the surface. You should expect a company of clones at your location within half an hour."

"Great," said Ahsoka. Now it was her turn to look over her shoulder. "Why exactly are we protecting this guy? He's trash, Master Kenobi."

"Republic Intelligence wants him alive," Obi-wan said. "He's a disreputable man, by all that I've heard, but our government has use for him."

Ahsoka shook her head. "We're better than this. If Riberre was working for the Seps and not us, we'd have a warrant for his arrest in every star system from here to Naboo!"

"Yes, we would," Obi-wan agreed. He leaned closer to the projector, and dropped his voice. "It's not the Jedi way to advocate for murder. But if you happen to fail your mission, I don't think anyone is going to shed a tear."

"I'd rather grab the Separatists," Ahsoka said.

"I'm not so sure that's a good idea," said Obi-wan. "I didn't feel any dark side energy in Komara yesterday."

"None?"

"Not a drop," Obi-wan said. "The Council made a mistake in dealing with her case like it did." Ahsoka was silent, a tight-lipped stare on her face. "I thought it went without saying that they made a mistake with you, too."

"Yeah, it might have," Ahsoka said, her eyes narrowed.

"And for what it's worth, I apologize for not speaking up at your... hearing."

"Better late than never," she said, before sighing. "I have the feeling you've got a favor to ask."

"Chancellor Tarkin and Director Orlok want Riberre off Zeltros, and soon."

"Yeah?"

"I don't think a man like that is going to start taking orders, do you?"

Ahsoka put a hand on her chin, and then slowly nodded. "You're right, I don't think he will."

"I'll be in touch, Ahsoka," Obi-wan said, before cutting off the transmission.

"One of my men, on a diplomatic mission, was *kidnapped* in *your* city, and you're telling me, there's nothing you can do!?" Esera nearly shouted into her comlink. She could only imagine the Ibisa security chief was sitting with a smug grin in his office.

"I'm sorry, but we'll need a warrant, and there's no witnesses but you, or even a probable cause to-"

She killed the line, and immediately switched to *Encounter*. "Murshida, launch the shuttle."

"Launching," Murshida said. "I'll see you down there, Captain."

I knew I should have brought those magnaguards along, thought Esera, as she fetched them from their posts outside her suite. She didn't pay the shocked employees and guests of the hotel the slightest heed as she swept through the lobby, the two cloaked droids at her back. *How could I have been so stupid? I let my guard down once, and this happens!*

"You, in the van," she said to one. "And you, with me." The magnaguard squeezing itself into the passenger seat of Voyan's speeder must have been a comedic sight. In any other situation, Esera might have laughed. Today, with the first light of dawn on the horizon, she could only glower silently. With the anonymous-looking hauler at her back, she drove Voyan's speeder to the empty industrial lot outside Ibisa, just in time to see *Encounter*'s cargo shuttle landing. The silver-armored bulk of the Skakoan ex-Cyberguard marched down the ramp.

"Good morning, Captain," said Murshida, planting his vibro-axe on the pavement with a solid thud. "Xiss and Mofuwa should be here soon."

"There's nothing good about this morning," Esera muttered. "My mission has turned into a fiasco. My chief engineer has been abducted. Now I've violated the Zeltrons' constitution by landing troops on their planet. And the worst thing is, I don't even care. If they try to stop me, I'll blow them away."

"This is uncharacteristically violent of you, Captain," said Murshida.

It was, Murshida was right. Between the pheromones in the air and her own frustration though, Esera's patience was gone and her blood burned hot. "Grievous told me never to let myself be a victim again, Murshida. Well, I'm not going to be a victim. I'm not going to go running away back to Raxus while my lieutenant is in the hands of a slimy Hutt cartel thug. I'm getting him back. Because my crew aren't going to be victims either, got it?"

"I feel safer already," Murshida said.

"I'm serious!" Esera said, boiling with fury. It took all of her strength to not completely lose her composure. Never in her Jedi days would she have been so openly emotional like this. "All my life, I've played nice, I've been respectful, I've been humble, and what has it gotten me? I've been pushed around, laughed at, derided, bullied, beaten- I'm a joke to this galaxy!" Her rant froze just as it began to build. *So this is how Voyan feels,* she realized. "I'm not going to have it, Mister Murshida," Esera said, taking a deep breath and trying to calm herself. "I'm not a joke. I'm Grievous's agent. Crossing me is crossing him. Would you cross Grievous, Murshida?"

"No," said the Skakoan.

"Then why should anyone cross me?"

The Skakoan nodded once. "A most *grievous* chastisement awaits our foes, Captain."

"Never make a pun like that ever again."

"Sorry, Captain."

The Jabiimi agents arrived shortly after, in a rental cargo hauler. "This had better be important," Mofuwa said, stepping out of the vehicle. Xiss followed, a scowl on her face.

"Your target just abducted my chief engineer," Esera said. "Now the Nautolan is my target, too. But what you might now know is that he's got Asajj Ventress and Ahsoka Tano out there."

"Oh, we know," said Mofuwa, as Xiss visibly shook with rage. But she kept her mouth closed. "Comrade Xiss has been fuming about them for days, now. I'm concerned she may not be able to complete the mission."

"You won't, not the way you planned." Esera brought them into the shuttle, and used the holoprojector to display a map of a mountain, its flat top bearing a large manor house. "Lieutenant Voyan isn't an idiot. His primary distress beacon was discovered, we only received a few minutes of transmission. But the secondary one is now transmitting his location to us, from inside this building. It's in his datapad, apparently."

"I'm not surprised our engineer had a redundancy like that built in," said Murshida. "He must have been very confident that thing would be near him."

"So, you want to rescue the engineer while we take out Riberre?" asked Mofuwa.

"More or less," Esera answered. "I still don't approve of assassinations. It's murder by another name. But as I was telling Mister Murshida here, I speak with General Grievous's authority. Anyone who crosses me, crosses him. Marko Riberre has removed himself from any possibility of me even trying to convince you to take him back to Jabiim for a real trial. He's put my crew in danger, and that's not something I take kindly to." Xiss muttered something under her breath. "Would you like to repeat that?" asked Esera.

"I said, it's about time you hardened up," Xiss said, avoiding eye contact. "A leader's first duty is to her people."

"More Jabiimi political philosophy?" Esera asked Mofuwa.

"Naturally," he replied. "Captain Komara, do you actually have a plan?"

"We have to assume my lieutenant's already told them everything," said Esera. "Trade Federation engineers are probably not trained in torture resistance. They'll know about me, you, and Xiss. Maybe even the magnaguards. They won't know about just what Murshida can do on the battlefield, or the reinforcements he's brought. And hopefully, Voyan doesn't remember you're with the Nimbus Commandos, Mofuwa. You'd better have brought your gear."

"Of course I did," said Mofuwa. *How* he did was beyond Esera, he and Xiss looked like they'd traveled light.

"So, here's the plan. I've got a ship with a cloak up on *Encounter*. We'll send the droids in as distraction force by cargo shuttle, get Riberre's men and hopefully Ventress and Tano too at the front door. Us four and the magnaguards will come in on *Whirlwind*, cloaked, and walk in the back," said Esera. "Then we do what we came to do."

"A wonderful plan, Captain," said Murshida, as he fiddled with the holoprojector's controls. *Encounter*'s sensors updated the map to show the latest additions to the terrain. Two Republic gunships appeared on the estate's grounds. "But what are you going to do about the clones?"

Esera sighed. "Nothing's ever easy, is it?"

Riberre had welcomed the clone troopers right up until the moment they told him he had to leave. The idea of running from a single attacker had been disagreeable to him, failed Jedi padawan-turned-assassin brought back from the dead or not.

"This is my home!" Riberre said, fuming to the clone captain, who went by the name of Jet. "I'm not just going to run away because some brainwashed Zeltron wants to kill me!"

"Mister Riberre, we don't know what other assets they might have here," Captain Jet said. His helmet made him look as every bit of calm as he sounded, but Asajj felt how frustrated he was getting. The rigid discipline of the clones did not mesh well with men like Riberre. "For your own safety and the good of the Republic, we need you to-"

"The good of the Republic!?" The Nautolan roared with laughter. "You think I actually *care* about the Republic? I take your money and do as your bureaucrats ask, that's it!"

"Be that as it may, sir, we need you to-"

"I'm not going anywhere," said Riberre. "I'm not running from one girl."

Enough of this, Asajj thought, joining the pair where they stood in the garden, not far from the gunships that had landed. "Boss," Asajj said, "the clone's right. That Separatist I grabbed for you said there's a lot more down here than just one assassin. They've got magnaguards, commando droids, super battle droids, they might have their entire ship's marine landing force down here."

"I've seen those droids on the holonet, they're useless," said Riberre.

"If they come, we'll scrap them like the rest, Ventress," Jet said, annoyed he had to deal with a former Separatist war criminal.

"I actually agree with Riberre," Tano said, speaking up. Everyone turned to look at her. "He's a private citizen, the military can't tell him what to do."

"That's exactly right," said Riberre.

Asajj tried not to roll her eyes. The Nautolan had swallowed the propaganda that the battle droids were utterly incompetent, and now Tano was helping him continue to be obtuse. "So, Riberre, Jet, Tano, you all think you can hold out if the Separatists decide to level this estate?"

"Of course we can hold out," said the clone captain. "But my orders are to get Mister Riberre onto the star destroyer. That's what I'm going to do."

"I'm not going anywhere-" Riberre began to say, but Asajj held up her hand.

"Do you hear that?" she asked.

Jet nodded. "I heard something out there. Sounded like engines." He tapped the comlink on his wrist. "Jet to *Vigilance,* do you see anything down here with us?"

"Affirmative, Captain," a voice answered. "The Separatist shuttle is headed your way. ETA is five minutes."

"That's good to know, but we heard something a lot closer down here," said Jet.

"All scopes across the spectrum are clear, Captain."

For a few seconds, Asajj's heart raced, as she imagined something stealing *Banshee* and using it against her. A cloaked ship would still be heard, and even felt if it passed close enough. But that thought was absurd. She had half a dozen traps on that ship, any one of which would alert her that her ship was being stolen. Two cloaked ships on one planet was a massive improbability.

"*Vigilance,* can you tell what's on that shuttle?" Jet asked into his comlink. Only static answered. "*Vigilance,* do you copy?"

Riberre and Asajj exchanged a glance. Tano frowned.

Over on the lawn of the garden, the canopy of one of the gunships opened. "Captain!" the pilot shouted. "We're being jammed! Comms are down!"

"Time to evacuate!" Jet said. "Everyone on the gunships! Including you, Nautolan."

"How can they be jamming us?" Asajj asked herself. "Those transport shuttles don't have any jammers."

"Clearly, there's something else out there," said Tano.

"You, you," Riberre shouted to two of his own men. "With me, we're getting the safe."

Captain Jet sighed again. "Fine," he said. "You've got four minutes before I stun you and drag you up to the ship."

But only two minutes passed before the gunships exploded.

"No one ever told me electronic warfare made things this easy," Esera muttered, raising *Whirlwind*'s cloak before anyone saw the ship hovering a kilometer away from the estate, or the two proton torpedoes it had launched.

"It's a basic principle of warfare," Mofuwa said, his voice vaguely distorted behind his Nimbus commando helmet. "Command, control, communications, coordination. The more you disrupt them, the swifter the enemy will fall."

The proton torpedoes slammed into the Republic gunships, disintegrated them in twin fireballs, and setting the garden lawn ablaze. Esera warily eyed the surrounding forest that covered the mountains and hills, lush and green from the moisture carried in off the sea, over the horizon. *I hope I just didn't cause a disaster,* she thought.

"The Jabiimi is right," Murshida agreed. "We learned much the same on Skako."

"Let's just get on with it," Xiss said, her foot tapping on the deck plating like a pneumatic hammer. The Zeltron's complaints might have elicited a delay in deployment, but Esera was on a rescue mission, she could brook no such delay.

"I'm putting us down on the other side of the house," she said. While Riberre's mountain-top estate and Esera's family home on Stalimur were both houses, they were both houses in the same way *Whirlwind* and *Encounter* were both starships. One was massively larger than the other. *How many rooms and halls are in there? How long will it take to search?* Not that Esera would need to go room-by-room, she had the Force. Sooner or later she'd feel Voyan's presence. *If time's an issue, I'll just cut through the walls!*

Whirlwind set down on a patch of grass on the far side of the estate, sinking into the soft ground. Murshida and the magnaguards used the lift to get down to the ramp, Esera and the others went by ladder, on account of their smaller size. Their arrival went entirely unnoticed, as did the three depressions left in the ground by *Whirlwind*'s landing gear. The ramp closed behind them, leaving no other traces of the ship's presence. On the horizon, Esera saw the rapidly-approaching shuttle from *Encounter*, loaded full of droids. And one of the clone troopers was aiming a rocket launcher at it.

Esera sighed. "Mofuwa, take him down," she said.

"We'll blow our cover-" Xiss started to say, but Esera didn't let up.

"Better than losing the droids. Shoot him."

The Nimbus Commando didn't answer with words. He shouldered his blaster, and dispatched the clone with one shot to the back, at a distance of well over a hundred meters. *As expected of the Nimbus Commandos,* thought Esera. The other troopers began to shout, and turned to face the new threat.

"Nice, Komara," Xiss said, as they dove for cover behind the corner of the manor house. "Real nice!"

"Did you really want to fight all those clones alone?" asked Esera.

"It was the right call," Mofuwa said. "Shut up and get to work, Comrade Xiss."

Xiss activated her lightsaber, and sliced through the first window she saw. One by one, they climbed in. Esera could hear the clones storming into the house as Riberre's thugs tried to figure out what was going on. Moments later, she heard the roar of the shuttle's engine and blaster fire. It landed with an impact that shook the house.

"That'll give them more to shoot at than just us," Esera said. "Mofuwa, Xiss, find Riberre if you can. Murshida, with me!"

In moments, the tranquil garden had become a battleground, as Separatist droids poured out of their shuttle. Asajj, for the first time, found herself in the sights of the very machines she had once commanded. *I wish these things were as dumb as the Holonet made them out to be,* Asajj thought, as they droids rushed for cover instead of walking forward into whatever crossfire the clones were surely trying to set up. Two squads of clone troopers were an even match for a platoon of super battle droids and a cadre of commando droids. But Komara was here too, and the would-be assassin, and a Jabiimi soldier, and the two unmistakable magnaguards, *and* a huge Skakoan in silver armor and red robes. Asajj wasn't sure she'd be able to protect Riberre and fight off the Separatist menagerie at the same time. Quantity had a quality all of its own.

The menagerie had gone inside, she'd need to be in there too. "Jet, take care of the droids, I'm going after the others," she told the clone.

"I don't take orders from-"

"Just do it, buckethead!" Asajj said, running off before he could say anything more. As she ran, she looked for Tano, but the Togruta had vanished. *Maybe she's already inside?*

Riberre's estate was unnecessarily large, winding halls and many-doored rooms created an impromptu labyrinth for anyone without knowledge of the interior. Given his underworld background, Asajj guessed confusion was the intention. She let her senses guide her through the manor, feeling the presence of Komara and the others growing closer and closer as she stalked them through the empty halls, the muted sounds of blasters outside was the only hint that a battle was happening. But if she sensed them, they'd sense her.

"Ventress is near," Xiss hissed, a tremor going through her body.

"Yeah, she's following us," said Esera. "Ahsoka Tano's around too. And Voyan is up there, somewhere."

"And what about our target?" Mofuwa asked.

"You're going to have to deal with Ventress before dealing with him," Esera said.

"We can take her," said Xiss, but her feelings betrayed her. She feared the former dark sider, almost as much as she hated her. The Zeltron girl was hovering dangerously close to the dark side herself.

"If I can't take Ventress, you sure as hell can't," Esera told her. "Not alone. Murshida, go with them."

"Are you sure that's wise?" asked the huge Skakoan.

"No, but I've got the magnaguards and I'm feeling a lot better than last time I dealt with Ahsoka. Keep your distance at first, Ventress has no idea what you can do. But if those two need help, then help. Surprise will be your best weapon against her. I doubt she's known any Skakoans but engineers and scientists."

"As you wish, captain," said Murshida.

The three of them turned around, leaving Esera and Grievous's droids to advance alone. The house was silent, but for the sounds of fighting outside. Her target was on one of the upper floors, so Esera and the magnaguards made their way up a steep, narrow staircase tucked away on the side of the house. *This must be for the serving droids,* thought Esera, as she looked back to see her battle-droids brushing against the walls with their wide shoulders.

They crept through the dim, unused rooms and halls, sticking to the carpets whenever possible. But hiding her presence in the Force was impossible for Esera, just as it was for Ahsoka Tano. The two of them knew they were near each other, and Esera was ready. She held her lightsaber at the ready as she entered the next room, and saw the Togruta.

"Komara," said Tano, standing in the doorway opposite of Esera.

"I'm not here to fight you," said Esera.

"That's funny, I was about to say that," Tano said in turn.

"Oh." Esera almost lowered her lightsaber, but then she remembered: this was Skywalker's apprentice. Skywalker, the man for whom no deception was too shameful, and Tano had taken after him. Esera's right hand spasmed as she remembered her last meeting with the Togruta.

"Look," Tano said, raising her hands, "we didn't exactly part on good terms, on Grievous's ship. You don't like me, I don't like you. Okay, that's fine. But Master Kenobi says you didn't fall to the dark side. I need to know... Is he right?"

"Yes," said Esera, frowning. "I made a mistake, that day. I wasn't used to feeling anger like that. Apparently it runs in the family."

"Right... So, you're not a Dark Jedi. The Council wrongly expelled you."

"No," Esera said, "they rightfully expelled me for treason. I'm a traitor to the Republic. The Dark Jedi accusation was fabricated by the Jedi Knight Ardabur Aspar. The same Aspar whose orbital bombardment of Shumavar's cities I briefly foiled."

"Why didn't you bring this to the Council?" asked Tano.

"Admiral Holt was in on it, Tano," said Esera. "Do you think one girl's word would hold any weight against an established Jedi general *and* a flag officer? When they expelled you simply because the Senate asked them to? The Order has bowed to a corrupt institution, and become corrupt itself. I could not serve either any longer."

Tano wanted to argue, more than anything, Esera could feel that. She opened her mouth, but the words did not come, and a dark look came across her face. "I can't refute that," she said. "I want to, but I can't. The difference between us is that I think the Republic can still be saved. And it *should* be saved."

"Alright, then," said Esera. "Are you just here to talk? I need to rescue the officer of mine you tried to arrest, despite our diplomatic mission."

Tano looked away. "Almost every Separatist I've ever met has been a criminal," she said. "I presumed he was up to no good."

"Voyan deserves a lot of what he gets for being so insufferable, but he doesn't deserve kidnapping," Esera said. "Especially at the hands of a Hutt cartel thug."

"I had nothing to do with that," said Tano, giving her a glare. "In fact, I'm so against it that I'm going to tell you where he is. There's a room on the top floor of the house, on the south side. Riberre and his men are up there trying to get the money out. And who knows what else is in the safe up there. Your officer is probably right where they left him, in a room on the west side."

"Oh. Thank you," said Esera. Expressing gratitude to the woman who crippled her right hand for life made her stomach twist in disgust, but whether she liked it or not, Tano was helping her.

"I have one last question, Komara," Tano said.

"Yes?"

"How did you do it?" she asked. "How did you go from Jedi to... whatever you are now? How did you give up the only life you've ever known?"

"Honestly, I've barely had time to think about it," said Esera. "And when I do, I start falling apart."

"Ah..." The disappointment in Tano's spirit was immeasurable, even if she kept it off her face.

"We've been at war since we were fourteen, Tano," Esera said. "You and I are paying the price for that. We will be for a long time, I'm sure. Now if you excuse me, I have an officer to rescue."

"Go on ahead," the Togruta said, but a troubled look came over her face. "Wait."

"Yes?" asked Esera, trying not to sigh.

"Look after Zule, would you?" Tano asked her.

"I'll try," said Esera. Then Tano parted the doorway and left the room.

Well, that was unexpected, thought Esera. *Have I un-made an enemy?*

"Ventress!" came the cry of a girl. Asajj turned, and looked down the hall, to see a red-skinned Zeltron facing her. "I've come for my revenge!"

"Revenge? For what?" asked Asajj, raising an eyebrow.

"You killed my master! Master Glaive! I watched as you cut his head off, and then you took my arm, too." The girl squeezed a mechanical fist. "It's going to end differently, today."

"Who are you, again?" Asajj asked.

The Zeltron nearly exploded on the spot. "You don't remember?!"

"Honey, I don't remember a thing. The day I killed this Glaive is clearly important to you. But for me? It was just another day on the job."

The Zeltron screamed in rage, and her lightsaber went on. Asajj rolled her eyes. In truth, she had a very vague memory of a red-skinned young woman trying to fight her on the moon of Naboo, but she'd gone up against so many Jedi back then that she couldn't keep them all straight in her mind. "My name is Zule Xiss," the Zeltron spat, taking up a fighting stance. "I'll make sure you remember *this* fight!"

"Okay, kid," said Asajj, activating her own lightsaber. "You won't last thirty seconds." Xiss let out another shout, and charged headlong. Asajj side-stepped her effortlessly, and her blade nicked the girl on the outside of her thigh. She went tumbling to the ground. "Make that five," Asajj said. "Come on, get up, at least make this entertaining for me."

As the Zeltron stood, the wall suddenly exploded, and out flew a boot that caught Asajj right in the chest. She flew backwards and went sprawling herself. *What the hell?* A distraction! The Zeltron had completely taken up her focus, she hadn't even felt the presence of this newcomer. *The Nimbus Commando,* Asajj thought, as the masked man zipped down the hall away from her, his repulsorskate thrusters burning blue.

"Nice trick," Asajj said, jumping to her feet. "But it won't work twice-"

A hail of red blaster fire forced her to spin around and deflect the bolts away. At the opposite end of the hall stood the Skakoan she'd seen earlier, and with him were two super battle droids, their wrist weapons aimed dead at her. A tiny *click* sent a chill down her spine, the sound of a wrist-rocket arming its warhead.

Asajj jumped for the closest window, as the rockets screeched over the fallen Zeltron girl, and flew out the window Asajj jumped through. She landed on the grass of the garden, and hardly had time to stand before the Nimbus commando was on her. He zoomed in circles around her, on his repulsorskates, blasting away at her with his gun, so fast that Asajj barely kept up with him. Then Xiss came flying out the window after her, with a howl.

Dealing with a failed padawan, a Nimbus Commando, and a mystery Skakoan would have been easy, if they hadn't all attacked at once. Asajj had no trouble keeping Xiss off her, but keeping Xiss off her while dealing with the speedy Jabiimi and the long-range fire coming from the other Separatists was pushing her focus to the breaking point. *One of them's got to go,* thought Asajj. She batted off another clumsy charge from Xiss, and locked the Jabiimi in her sights.

The Nimbus Commando was no fool, though. He had a warrior's instincts. Immediately, he reversed his course, his repulsorskates flaring bright as he flew off in another direction, pouring red blaster bolts down on Asajj. Around and around he circled her, relentlessly shooting, trying to find a hole in her lightsaber's swirling defenses. Asajj reached out with the Force and sent him tumbling, and she leapt at him, intent to finish their duel there, but the Jabiimi drew his combat knife even as he rolled. Asajj's lightsaber plunged into the grass beside his head as his knife plunged into her leg.

Asajj only grunted, she'd had far worse wounds. The Jabiimi slammed a fist into her knee, and then Xiss was back for more, battering away at Asajj's lightsaber, like a maniac. She had no finesse, no art in her attacks, only rage. The dark side whirled around her spirit, but it was weak, and unsure. Asajj sent her flying with a blast of Force energy, and the Zeltron slammed into the manor's wall and crumpled.

"Just you and me now, Jabiimi," said Asajj.

"There is nothing greater than to give one's life for one's nation," the Nimbus Commando said, breathing heavily through his helmet's vocoder. He raised his knife. "I am ready, Jedi," he said. "Are you?"

"I'm no Jedi," Asajj said. Before their battle could begin, Asajj felt a *thump* in the ground, and silver armor glinted in the sunlight behind her. "Getting awfully close, aren't you, Skakoan?"

"I am precisely where I need to be," said a deep voice. The hum of a vibro-weapon sounded in Asajj's ear, and she ducked as the axe blade swung through the space where her head had been a moment before. The two super battle droids were up next, spraying red blaster bolts everywhere in her general direction, closing all the while. One swung its fist at Asajj; she knew from experience that if the punch connected, she'd be crippled. Asajj jumped away, and the droid's fist left a crater in the manor's stone wall. As the droid pulled itself back, Asajj jumped again, forward this time, and cut it and its companion down. *Deadly, but slow,* she thought. *I wish it were the same of these other two!*

The Jabiimi and the Skakoan were playing to their strengths. The Skakoan got in her face while the Nimbus Commando attacked from afar, never staying in one spot long enough for her to attack back. Sweat poured down Asajj's back, her lungs burned, but her opponents weren't doing much better. The Jabiimi faltered first, overshooting on his repulsorskates, the arc of his trajectory finally coming within range of Asajj's blade. She feinted an attack towards the Skakoan, and then slashed up, catching the Nimbus Commando square in the chest. He crashed into the ground with a groan, and Asajj turned to face the Skakoan, now alone.

But the Jabiimi wasn't down yet. Asajj learned that when she heard the blaster shoot, and felt a burning pain in her right shoulder. "I've had enough of you!" Asajj hissed, lunging for the stricken Jabiimi, who'd pushed himself onto his knees, and held a blaster pistol in an unsteady hand.

"Then end it, you dog of the Republic!" answered the Jabiimi. He shot at her, again, and again, as Asajj soared towards him, her lightsaber bouncing his shots away. Her blade plunged through his heart, and with one final exhalation, the Nimbus Commando's presence in the living Force vanished.

"One on one, now, Skakoan," Asajj said, gasping for breath. Blood spilled down her leg from the knife wound, her shoulder burned from the blaster hit. The Skakoan stood tall and unblemished. One wounded former Sith acolyte against whatever this alien was. Asajj still liked those odds.

"You are a fine warrior, Ventress," the Skakoan said. "My struggle is not with you, but with your criminal employer. He does not deserve your talents nor your allegiance. Leave this place, I will not pursue."

"A job's a job, and I've got bills to pay," said Asajj, giving the best shrug she could with her fried right shoulder. The wound didn't matter, she could fight just as well with her left hand.

"If I've learned one thing in seventy years of life, it's that there's so much more to this world than money," the Skakoan said. Having only known Skakoans as greedy Techno Union businessmen and slimy Techno Union scientists, those words confounded her almost as much as they annoyed her.

"Yeah? Try telling that to the debt-collectors. They don't have such a romantic view of the universe as you do," Asajj said. "Here's the deal, old man. *You* leave this place, and *I* won't pursue *you*. There's not a piece of armor in this galaxy that will save you from a lightsaber. Whatever you're hoping to accomplish... it's not gonna happen."

"We'll see about that," said the Skakoan, readying his vibro-axe. Outwardly, Asajj kept her assured expression. But the swelling of energy in the Force around this aged alien struck a chord of worry in Asajj's heart. Who exactly was she dealing with here?

I'll make this fast, Asajj thought. She raised her blade, and charged, bringing it crashing down on the haft of the Skakoan's weapon. It *should* have gone straight through and into the alien's armored pressure suit, but instead, her blade shorted out, and her momentum carried her tumbling past her target.

The Skakoan didn't waste the opportunity. He whirled about, and swung his vibro-axe down at her. It missed Asajj by millimeters, and the Skakoan was already bringing his weapon around for another go. Asajj backpedaled, trying to restart her lightsaber. *Cortosis weave! Of course, of all the mysterious warriors in the galaxy, I meet the one who has cortosis weave on his axe!*

Asajj flung herself back, as the Skakoan's attacks came closer and closer. He was moving far too fast for a non-Force user, and Asajj was having far too much trouble reading his intentions. It was almost as if he wasn't thinking out his moves at all, and instead just letting his body's muscle memories decide his next attack. Finally, Asajj's lightsaber came back on, and she immediately went on the offensive, leaping around the swinging axe and going straight for the Skakoan's head. But as she flew, his fist swung up to meet her, sending her flying backwards. Asajj landed not far from the unconscious Xiss.

"You are a worthy opponent, Ventress!" the Skakoan said, his voice rumbling across the lawn. "It will not be dishonorable for you to withdraw now!"

"I don't give a damn about honor!" Asajj yelled back, getting to her feet.

"If this is a fight to the death, so be it," said the Skakoan. He twirled his axe in his hand, and saluted her.

If she hadn't already been wounded twice, and worn down from the three-on-one fight earlier, Asajj would have made mincemeat of this Skakoan. But she *was* wounded, and she *was* worn down. Every move she made was a little slower then the last, she felt light-headed, and she was having trouble staying steady on her feet. Asajj glanced at the knife wound in her leg. Everything below it was soaked a deep red from her blood. *It's not going to end like this! I'm not dying to this nobody alien!*

Asajj was backed into a corner, she had only one way out now. She grasped her anger and her fear, and let the dark side enter her. "To the death it is!" Asajj screamed, as she closed her fist, and lifted the Skakoan into the air with the Force. She squeezed the alien inside the armored pressure suit, waiting for that feeling of alarm and confusion as he lost his ability to breath.

But it didn't come. The Skakoan didn't even try to breath. A wave of calmness came over him, all his emotions fading away in the Force. His focus narrowed like a laser on her, and he raised an arm towards her. Asajj saw the blaster on his wrist not a moment too soon, she raised her lightsaber to block the bolts leaping out towards her. And as her vision was filled with the red flashes of the blaster and the yellow glare of her blade, she could only sense the vibro-axe flying towards her. She twisted her body, but the haft still got a glancing blow on her, before the weapon tumbled away over the lawn.

The Skakoan rushed at her with the speed of a combat droid, and Asajj raised her lightsaber. But she'd lost too much blood, her swing was too slow and clumsy, and the Skakoan caught her hand in his fist. He yanked, and Asajj heard a wet snap. Suddenly, her lightsaber was on the ground, her hand flopped around, and the bones of her arm were sticking out of her skin, slick and red. Asajj didn't have time to react to the pain before the Skakoan had flung her into the air. Her body slammed into the ground, and then the Skakoan was above her. His armored boot smashed down on her chest, again and again, each impact making a sickening snap.

But the Skakoan stopped. Asajj laid on the ground, each shallow breath a battle, her ribcage smashed and her organs most likely bleeding and bruised. A lesser woman would have died from that assault. The Skakoan slumped where he stood, the brutish ferocity from a moment ago gone.

"What are you waiting for?" Asajj gasped, convinced her lungs had been pierced by her broken ribs.

"You are no longer a threat, there is no need to kill you," the Skakoan said, exhaustion in his voice. He moved slowly, like a tired old man, and bending over with obvious pain to pick up his vibro-axe. "Captain Komara, medical attention needed outside," he said into his comlink. "Three down, one dead."

"Three?" Asajj counted two down.

"These combat stimulants were not meant to be used at my age," said the Skakoan. He dropped to his knees, axe still in hand, and then faceplanted into the lawn. All around them, the lawn was burning, and in the distance clones exchanged fire with droids. Somewhere in the house, someone was shooting.

I was beaten, thought Asajj. *It took three of them and one is dead, but they beat me!* The very idea left her with a fury intense enough to keep her alive, she was sure. *This isn't where it ends for me,* she thought. *I'm not dying to a failed padawan, a man on skates, and a Skakoan monster on drugs!* But now she knew, there were still threats in the Galaxy even she couldn't handle. She'd gone up against Dooku and that beastly Zabrak and she'd come out in better shape than she had against these three. Asajj could only reflect on the stupidity of her situation, before she too passed out.

"Great," sighed Esera, as Murshida's comlink went silent. "You two, go help Murshida and the others," she said to the magnaguards. "And don't fight Ahsoka Tano unless she attacks first!"

Was that a mistake? she wondered, realizing she'd once again separated herself from Grievous's trained guards. *If Ventress got the upper hand on them, I could be in trouble...* But if her people needed help, and she didn't send it... *No, it's not a mistake,* she told herself. *I didn't come here to rescue Voyan and lose Murshida. I'm getting them both out!*

Up she went, to the top floor of the house. Tano had said all Riberre's men were there, but that wasn't true any longer. On the penultimate floor, she heard voices. Esera took cover as she approached the last staircase.

"There's no droids in here, what are we doing?" asked one.

"The boss said make sure no one gets up here until its time to go, that's what we're doing."

Aha! thought Esera. *Time to act!*

"That's right," she said, stepping into their view and waving her hand, focusing her mind on theirs. "There's no one up here at all."

The two Zeltron men stared at her. One blinked, the other tilted his head. "Who the hell are you?" the first one asked.

"She's a Human, but she's not a clone, she must be one of the Separatist assassins!" said the second.

So much for the mind trick, thought Esera, sighing internally. One Zeltron uncoiled an energy whip, the second drew a blaster pistol. Esera didn't waste time with any more words, she took out her lightsaber, just in time to block the first shot. Neither man had any idea of how to fight an opponent like her, and she used the confusion to rush forward. With one slash, she'd cut the blaster pistol in half, and brought the man tumbling down the steps with a pull through the Force.

The man with the whip lashed out, and it coiled around the lightsaber blade, crackling. Esera wrenched her weapon free, but the other one was rising from where he'd fallen. She heard the vibro-knife before she saw it. "You two can still walk away from this," said Esera, realizing they had her pinned on the staircase; one above her, one below.

"And then the boss comes after us when he's done with you," said the Zeltron with the whip. "No thanks!"

"You saw how she cut through my gun," said the one with the knife, looking at his weapon with doubt.

"I can easily do it again," said Esera. "Get out of here, I'm not after you."

"Yeah, I'm out," said the knife-wielding man. He sheathed his blade and backed away down the stairs. "No reward's worth this."

"The boss will never-"

"If Marko thinks he can go up against *that,* he's insane!"

With that exchange, the Zeltron disappeared, and only the one with the energy whip remained, incensed he'd been abandoned. "Coward!" he yelled. "Well, assassin, looks like you're all mine. What can a delicious little thing like you really do, huh?" The Zeltron licked his lips, and readied his whip.

Esera gave him an unamused glare. "Come and find out," she said. Again, the Zeltron lashed out with his whip, but Esera leapt around it, intent on closing the distance between them. The whip would be useless up close. The Zeltron knew this too, and he rushed backwards. The tip of the whip coiled around the hilt of Esera's lightsaber, and the Zeltron flicked his wrist. Esera watched in disbelief as her lightsaber was yanked from her hands and went flying through the hall, and out a window, into the garden below.

You've got to be kidding, she thought, as the Zeltron cackled in glee.

"Disarmed already? Some assassin you are!" said the Zeltron.

Esera reached out a hand, and sent him crashing through a door. The wrong door, it turned out, as five more Zeltrons turned to look, all gathered in front of an open safe, bags in front of it half-filled with credit ingots. One was a woman, three were men, all were armed.

The whip-armed Zeltron got to his feet. "She's the Separatist assassin!" he said, cracking his energy whip.

"I'm not here for you," Esera said.

"Well, you're not getting through us," one of the men said back. Esera found herself looking down two blaster barrels as well as a stun baton pointed her way, and she was completely unarmed. Without even thinking about it, she threw out a wave of Force energy, throwing the Zeltrons back, and leaving her breathless from the effort. The distraction was all she needed; she pulled a gun from the hand of one of the men, and shot the other Zeltron with a blaster. Then she had to duck out of the way of the man with the stun baton, and then dodge the energy whip.

A door on the other side of the room was flung open, and out stepped an incredulous Nautolan. "Naka, what the hell is going on-!?" he bellowed, blaster pistol in hand, but froze for a moment when he saw Esera.

"I'm here for my lieutenant, Riberre," Esera said.

"She's an assassin!" the Zeltron with the energy whip said, lashing at her again.

Riberre took a shot at Esera, and then vanished back the way he came. The female Zeltron, Naka–surely, *the* Naka she and Voyan had discussed last night–stood by the safe, looking dumbfounded, her own vibro-knife held at her side, inactive.

"Don't just stand there, help us!" said the Zeltron with the stun baton, as he and the whip-wielder circled around to opposite sides of Esera.

"I said, I'm not here for you!" Esera told them, but they weren't listening. The man with the baton charged, Esera shot him down. She rolled forwards, out of the way of the man with the whip, before popping up and shooting him square in the chest. That only left Naka and the disarmed man, whose gun Esera now held. "If you know what's best for you, get out of here," said Esera, between breaths.

The disarmed Zeltron nodded, and fled. But Naka stayed.

"You're here for Miha?" asked Naka.

"Yeah," Esera said. She was panting, her mind itself seemed to ache from the strain of using that much Force energy against the thugs. *I didn't even know I had that strength in me,* she thought. "As insufferable as he is, I'm not letting you lot have him."

"Riberre's probably going to hold him hostage, now that you've dealt with his goons," said Naka. "I don't want Miha hurt, though. I'll try to talk to him."

"Uh, sure," Esera said, forcing herself to stand upright. With her lightsaber lost in the bushes below the manor's walls, the blaster pistol was all she had. Naka followed the Nautolan, towards the side of the house where Tano had said Voyan was being held.

"Boss," Naka called out, "she's not the assassin! She's just here for the Separatist!"

"And what makes you think she's not going to hand me over to the assassins once she has what she wants?" came Riberre's voice.

"I don't sense any deception from her," said Naka.

"You stupid little girl, can't you see you're getting played?"

Naka, in the next room over, gave Esera a worried glance. And as she turned her attention away from what was in front of her, Riberre emerged from yet another doorway, pistol aimed and ready.

"Out of the way, Naka," he said, his voice hard and cold.

"Boss, she just wants-" Naka started to say, but the sound of the blaster's discharge silenced her. She fell to the floor, clutching her chest. Right away, Esera shot back, but the Nautolan disappeared again.

"You'll live," Esera told Naka, after briefly inspecting her wound. "He missed your vitals."

"I can't believe it," Naka gasped. "He shot me..."

"Of course he did!" said Esera. "He's a Hutt cartel kingpin! What did you expect, someone who *wasn't* paranoid and violent?"

The Zeltron girl closed her eyes and winced in pain. "Just save Miha," she said.

Esera shook her head, and went off to save the hapless engineer. Silently, she stalked through the maze-like array of rooms and halls, homing in on Voyan's presence in the Force, and the other, hostile presence she didn't know. After a minute that felt like an hour, she'd pinned them down behind one door. Esera kicked it open.

"Riberre!" Esera said. The Nautolan froze, and stared. His blaster was drawn, and he had a very roughed-up Voyan on his knees next to him. Riberre kept one hand on the Human's shoulder, while the other held the blaster pointing at Esera. Slowly, he moved behind Voyan.

"I'm going to offer you a deal, and I'm going to offer it once," said Esera. "You've really gotten on my bad side, but I'm giving you *one* chance. All you have to do is let my lieutenant go, and you can walk out of this room alive. Take your chances with the Jabiimis or make a break for it, I don't care. Just walk away. Let my lieutenant go, and just walk away."

"Not good enough, girl," Riberre said, turning the blaster from her to Voyan. "You're going to give me safe passage to orbit. No Separatist tricks."

He doesn't take me seriously, Esera thought. She could feel the scorn and flippancy in him, right there with his ruthlessness. This man thought he was going to be able to walk right over her and get everything he wanted. But he'd put one of her people's lives on the line.

"That's not what I offered," said Esera, staring the Nautolan down over the blaster pistol. She let the Force flow through her, and put both hands on the gun to hold it steady. The Nautolan bared his teeth. Voyan's thoughts were not panicked, not like they had been as he faced imminent death on Zygerria. He was agitated, and anxious, but he was waiting on her. He trusted her to make the right move.

"I'm warning you, girl! One twitch, and your little engineer dies!" Riberre said, a crazed grin on his face as he held his blaster to Voyan's head. The Nautolan was ready to shoot, Esera could feel that in the Force. Even if it were just to spite her, he *would* kill Voyan.

Esera's eyes narrowed. "Maybe you won't even twitch."

She squeezed the trigger. The red blaster bolt leapt out, streaking through the air in a fraction of a second. It impacted Riberre's right eye, melting through the tissue and boiling through the fluid, plowing through the nerve and severing his brain from his spinal chord. The Nautolan dropped dead, life-presence in the Force winking out instantly, his nervous system split in two. He hadn't even twitched.

Voyan was still kneeling, looking shocked. He slowly looked behind him, at Riberre's corpse. "You're a damn good shot, Captain," he said, in an unsteady voice. "I was waiting for some Jedi magic, but... you just put him down."

"You heard the man," said Esera. "One twitch and you were dead. I wasn't taking that chance." She tucked the blaster pistol into her jacket pocket, and helped Voyan to his feet. *He's as light as I am,* she thought, though lifting him up made her realize just how much that blast of Force energy had drained her. They got to the room where Naka was still laying on the floor. The two stared at each other, emotions whirling in the Force, and decidedly more negative from Voyan.

"I guess we've both been better," Naka said, offering a weak smile.

"I always figured you'd end up shot by one of your shady friends," Voyan said. Esera put him against the wall, where he leaned.

"You two sound like you have a lot of things to work out," said Esera. "Why don't you do that while I see what the hell is happening here?"

The Zeltron and Human were left to awkwardly look at each other while Esera checked in with the magnaguards. They'd found Xiss, Murshida, and Ventress all passed out on the lawn outside the manor house in varying degrees of medical emergency, and Mofuwa was dead. The droids had the clones pushed back to the edge of property and *Encounter*'s sensors indicated Republic reinforcements were on the way. *Time to go!* Esera thought, as she recalled a number of droids to the house. She had them bring Murshida and Xiss back to *Whirlwind* while some came inside with bacta patches for the engineer and Zeltron girl.

"Never thought a battle droid would be helping me," Naka muttered.

The droids did more than bring medical supplies, they helped the pair down to the ground floor. Esera sent them back in to retrieve Riberre's corpse, as well as all those credit ingots just sitting in the opened safe. *It'd be a waste to just leave them there for his criminal underlings,* thought Esera.

By now, the clones had retreated off the property and had hunkered down in the woodlands on the mountain slopes, luckily on the other side of the house from *Whirlwind*. Ahsoka Tano chose that moment to make her second appearance, as Esera watched over the Zeltron girl and Human engineer.

"Sorry to bother you again," Tano said, emerging from the house. "But Ventress could use some help and I don't have any to give her."

"You're really asking me to help Ventress?" asked Esera.

Tano shrugged. "She'll bleed out if we don't do anything. Is that who we are?"

Esera sighed. "Fine. You, you, go patch Ventress up," she said to two droids.

"Thank you," said Tano. She reached out, holding something that glinted silver in the sun. "By the way, you dropped this."

My lightsaber! Esera thought. Somehow it'd slipped her mind, between rescuing her lieutenant and cleaning up the mess this operation had made. "Uh, thanks. Again."

"You help me, I help you. We're not friends, but we don't have to be enemies," Tano said. Months ago, at the black hole, Esera had said those exact words to Voyan.

"I can live with that," said Esera. Tano went off with the droids, giving them a very wary look. When Xiss and Murshida were safely aboard *Whirlwind,* along with the items from the house, Esera sounded the retreat to orbit. "If you two have anything to say to each other, now's the time," she told Voyan and Naka, before withdrawing just to the edge of hearing range. There was no way she'd pass up listening in on this conversation. The two of them stared at each other, and for a moment, Esera was sure they'd have nothing to say to each other.

"Why?" Voyan suddenly asked.

"Why what?" Naka asked.

"After everything I told you, about Lirra and growing up there, what gave you the idea that I'd ever accept being used like that?"

"I didn't mean to, at first..." Naka said, looking away. "At the time it seemed so small. Inconsequential. You were only carrying things between Zeltros and Druckenwell, you weren't even aware of it. And I kept doing it, because you were making me the money I needed to pay my debt. I thought you'd understand. I thought you'd be alright with it, if you knew it was helping me. Besides, it wasn't like anyone was getting hurt. I'm sorry I did it, I really am, but that's what I was thinking."

"That anyone was getting hurt or not–and they were–wasn't the issue, it was the principle of the matter," Voyan said, closing his fist before opening it again. He sighed, and put a hand on his temple. "But I suppose that's beyond your comprehension. You haven't seen what your friends have done to my people. You haven't lived with it. You have no basis on which to understand this principle of mine. And I wonder if I can really hate you for that, after all."

A ray of hope dawned on Naka's face. "Can you forgive me?" she asked.

"No," Voyan said, utterly crushing the Zeltron girl with a single word. "It's the principle of the matter, like I said. I can't forgive you for what you did. But I will thank you."

Naka went from despairing to flabbergasted. Her mouth opened but no words came out.

"I had a lot of time to think, while your boss was beating the information he wanted out of me," said Voyan. "I imagined what would have happened, if I hadn't discovered your deception. I'd have given up my dream of working on a starship. I'd be in Ibisa, tinkering with speeders and driving tourists around the city for a living, trying to fit in with you Zeltrons, but never able to. I can't imagine I could ever do anything meaningful with my life, here. Because of you, I instead set out on this journey. I'm the chief engineer of a starship now. I work for..." He glanced over at Esera. "Whoever the hell that is, over there. Jedi, diplomat, captain, schoolgirl, it's hard to tell. But she says she's going to make a difference in this galaxy, and I'm going to be a part of that. And it's all because of you."

Whatever Naka was going to say to that, Esera would never know. The droids signaled her that they were ready to depart, and the Republic reinforcements were minutes away. "Voyan, it's time to go," she said.

Voyan nodded, and Naka took the chance to speak. "We're not ever going to meet again, are we?" she asked.

"I should hope not," said Voyan.

"You're right, I don't understand your principle of the whatever," Naka said. "I'm glad you don't hate me, but... I just want you to know, I really am truly sorry for what I did. I really did love you."

"If it was love, you wouldn't have had to hide anything from me," said Voyan. "That's another lesson I'm thankful for, Naka. Goodbye, and... good luck."

"Good luck to you too, Miha," said Naka. They left her in the shadow of the house, looking forlorn, but somewhat relieved, as if a weight had been lifted from her shoulders. Something had definitely changed in Voyan's spirit, too.

"Did that feel good?" Esera asked him, once they were on *Whirlwind*.

"I didn't know I needed that closure. Thank you, too, for that, Captain," Voyan said, sinking into one of the passenger seats as they lifted off. He closed his eyes, and said nothing more.

It's a small win, on this disaster of a mission, Esera thought, *but it's still a win.*

"Captain Komara," came the voice of *Encounter*'s droid commander over the comms, "the Republic cruiser is powering up its main batteries and launching fighters."

"Oh, come on!"

Author's note: Yep, it was another Timewatch gets stumped for two months on a fight chapter episode. I really need to quit writing these small-scale tactical actions. I hope our Ahsoka "stans" (to borrow the zoomer phrase) will be satisfied she's using her brain and not her brainwashing now. I hope our Ventress "stans" can accept our favorite formerly-bald witch got taken down by two very unconventional fighters and a distracting angry girl. Murshida would have been stomped if he'd gone one-on-one with an unwounded Ventress. But they knew to fight smart, not hard. Tune in next time for the conclusion of the Zeltros arc, and hopefully it'll take two weeks and not two months to write!

Oh right, someone suggested ZakoBattledroid as a beta reader. He's refused the offer multiple times. Corshy's doing a good job anyway, he catches mistakes that slipped by me a thousand times.

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